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WASHINGTON, DC—U.S. Congressman Peter DeFazio voted last night in support of the SAFE Port Act, H.R. 4954, comprehensive legislation that will improve the security of our nation's ports. The bill passed the House.

Even before the prospect of the Dubai Ports acquisition brought the issue of port security to the forefront, dangerous vulnerabilities existed in our global supply chain, reaching far beyond the shores of our nation's seaports. The maritime transport system is vulnerable to attack and exploitation by terrorists. We need to extend our security perimeter to the deep ocean or foreign ports to prevent the nightmare scenario of the detonation of a weapon of mass destruction in a U.S. port.

Although this legislation will improve port and supply chain security, it fails to require 100 percent scanning of containers before they arrive in the U.S. By the time a weapon of mass destruction arrives at a U.S. port, it is too late.

"I think most Americans would be shocked to learn that five years after 9/11, we're still protecting our ports with an honor system, instead of security, certainty and good intelligence," DeFazio said. "Each shipper is asked to send us an invoice which discloses what they're shipping and only a tiny percentage of containers are well-secured and actually inspected. It's not very likely that a terrorist would voluntarily disclose that they are shipping 199 concrete birdbaths and a nuclear bomb.

"This legislation will create a chain of custody for goods and containers coming to the United States that will be much more likely to prevent terrorists from shipping either themselves or weapons to our shores, but it does not go far enough. We need to scan 100 percent of cargo bound for the U.S. on the other side of the ocean, not in U.S. ports, and then monitor the container and cargo movement until they make U.S. landfall."

The following are highlights of the SAFE Port Act:

- authorizes \$400 million in port security grants for each of fiscal years 2007 through 2012;

- requires ports to provide training to longshoremen and other port workers to recognize security risks and respond to a terrorist attack;
- creates firm deadlines requiring the Department of Homeland Security to issue the long-delayed Transportation Worker Identification Credential (TWIC) cards to workers with access to secure areas of ports which would require background security checks;
- authorizes the hiring of 1000 new Customs and Border Protection officers over the next five years;
- by the end of 2007, requires all containers that enter the 22 busiest U.S. ports be scanned for radiation before they leave the port facility for their destination within the U.S.

Next Step: The Senate and the House of Representatives each passed a version of the SAFE Ports Act earlier this year. A conference committee worked out the differences between the two bills and drafted a final bill, which passed the House last night. The legislation must pass the Senate one more time before it can be sent to the president to be signed into law.